

IMMUTABILITY

Introducing Divine Immutability

In light of recent attacks upon the historically held doctrine of divine immutability, or changelessness, by Process Theology and Open Theism, this paper seeks to reexamine and restate divine immutability in a way that both refutes the attacks of these systems and benefits from many of their critiques. In doing so, the practical relevance of divine immutability will be stated, the classic view and those held by open theologians and process theologians will be examined, and the position of this author will be set forth and defended.

Before discussing the immense relevance of this topic, it is important to begin with a brief working definition of divine immutability. “The Immutability of God is a necessary concomitant of His aseity. It is that perfection of God by which He is devoid of all change, not only in His Being, but also in His perfections, and in His purposes and promises.”¹

The Importance of Divine Immutability

Why is God’s immutability, His changelessness, so important? Why should one not concede to open theologians that God changes? Because if God primarily exists within time and changes with time, rather than presiding over time as the Lord of time, then, as Edwards states, “all the prophecies we have in Scripture concerning the great *Antichristian* apostasy . . . are

¹Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 58.

uttered without knowing the things foretold.”² He goes on to note that, “all those great things which are foretold both in the Old Testament and the New, concerning the erection, establishment, and universal extent of the *kingdom* of the *Messiah* were predicted and promised while God was in ignorance.”³ Edwards is speaking of God’s foreknowledge and not His immutability; however, just as Berkhof noted that immutability is “concomitant of His aseity,”⁴ so too is immutability dependent upon foreknowledge. If God does not possess exhaustive foreknowledge then the acquisition of new knowledge is by definition change. From the above discussion, it is clear that “A creator and sustainer of the world who is vulnerable to mutability, a redeemer and judge of mankind whose essential nature might waver and whose purpose may vacillate, is not a deity in whom we can ever be religiously at rest.”⁵ Gerald Bray succinctly states that a passable God “is cold comfort to the sinner who needs a God who is strong to save, not one who is weakened by our infirmities.”⁶

Survey of Positions on Divine Immutability

The Historically Orthodox View

Prior to discussing the two divergent views, Process Theology and Open Theism, it is important to begin by stating the historically orthodox view of divine immutability. Irenaeus writes in *Against Heresies*, “God alone, who is Lord of all, is without beginning and without end,

²Jonathan Edwards, “A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of Will, Which is Supposed to be Essential to Moral Agency, Virtue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1834), 1:32.

³Ibid.

⁴Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 58.

⁵Carl F. H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 5:288.

⁶Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 100.

being truly and for ever the same, and always remaining the same unchangeable Being.”⁷ When writing about the incarnation Hippolytus says that Christ maintains His “unchangeable perfection.”⁸ Furthermore he says, “For the divine is just the same after the incarnation that it was before the incarnation; in its essence infinite, illimitable, impassible, incomparable, unchangeable, inconvertible, self-potent, and, in short, subsisting in essence alone the infinitely worthy good.”⁹ Noting the unanimity with which divine immutability has been held as the orthodox view Norman Geisler explains, “While lively debate has occurred over how God relates to a changing world, particularly in the present nonetheless, there has been a unity on God’s immutability.”¹⁰ Stating the connection between God’s immutability and other orthodoxly held aspects of God’s character Robert L. Dabney exclaims,

[Immutability] flows from His necessary existence; which is such that He cannot be any other than just what He is. It follows from His self-existence and independence; there being none to change Him. . . It follows from His perfection; for being infinite, He cannot change for the better; and will not change for the worse. Scarcely any attribute is more clearly manifested to the reason than God’s immutability.¹¹

Adherents to the historically orthodox position would point to numerous passages in Scripture which confirm their explanation of divine immutability. “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it?

⁷Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.35.2, trans. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe under the title *Against Heresies*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 [ANF] (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 1:411.

⁸Hippolytus, *Against Beron and Helix* 2.2.5.4, trans. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe under the title *Against Beron and Helix*, in *Fathers of the Third Century: Hippolytus, Cyprian, Caius, Novatian, Appendix*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 [ANF] (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1886; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 5:233.

⁹*Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁰Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002-05), 2:77.

¹¹Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Company of St. Louis, 1878; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 45.

Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it” (Num 23:19)?¹² Scripture speaks this way of God the Father when it states, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (Jas 17:7). It also speaks this way of God the Son, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8). Throughout the New Testament the Holy Spirit is referred to as “the Spirit of Truth” (cf. John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6); furthermore it is written that “the Spirit is the truth” (I John 5:6). Scripture, therefore, speaks of the Holy Spirit as immutable, as truth is by its very nature objective and unchanging. “There is none holy like the LORD; there is none besides you; there is no rock like our God” (1 Sam 2:2). Man is exhorted to “Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD GOD is an everlasting rock” (Isa 26:4). During the sermon on the mount Jesus compares those who hear and obey His Word to a man who has built his house on the rock, a house which remains steadfast during the storm (Matt 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49). Ephesians 2:20 speaks of the Word of God as the church’s foundation and Christ as its chief cornerstone. Not only does Scripture frequently speak of God’s immutability, it is also explicitly clear concerning the necessity of and application of this aspect of God’s character.

The View of Process Theology

Two recent developments which have offered numerous criticism and critiques of this view are Process Theology and Open Theism. Process theologians hold that God is in a constant state of change, that “God’s being is defined as an eternally on-going event, and an event which is dynamic and open.”¹³ Process theologians would hold that “God is dependent on the

¹²Scripture quotations are the English Standard Version.

¹³Gregory A. Boyd, *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation and Reconstruction of Hartshorne’s Dipolar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1992), 386.

processes of the world.”¹⁴ Process theology is a reaction against a distorted view of God that understands him to be uninvolved, disconnected, and static, a view with which this author disagrees. However helpful many of their critiques may be and however pure their intentions, their reactions have gone too far creating a dipolar god who is divided between “his unchanging abstract essence and his concrete actuality.”¹⁵ Ultimately, Process Theology aims at establishing a genuine relationship between God and man,¹⁶ and its appeal

comes from the fact that all people have a deep longing to mean something, to feel significant in the universe . . . process theologians reject the doctrine of God’s immutability and tell us that our actions are so significant that they have an influence on the very being of God himself!¹⁷

Unlike the historically orthodox view and that of Open Theism who both ground their views in Scripture, to one degree or another, “process theology is not derived from revelation as given in the Scriptures, but from mathematical and scientific hypotheses (Alfred North Whitehead) and rationalistic speculation (Charles Hartshorne).”¹⁸ “Whitehead’s concept of God in process arose out of his study of mathematics, which observed ‘the general activity of the flux of the world.’ Whitehead emphasized that ‘process is the rule of the world.’”¹⁹ Because of this Whitehead was led to include God in this process, not as Lord over process but as co-participant in process as He, like man and the entirety of creation, is also undergoing transition. For the process theologian God ever remains in this state of becoming. The dipolar theism mentioned earlier, and its resulting categories, originated within Whitehead’s system of process. According

¹⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 306.

¹⁵Ibid., 305.

¹⁶Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 89.

¹⁷Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 166.

¹⁸Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 583.

¹⁹Ibid., 581.

to Hartshorne, “God is only a ‘Director’ of the world, working in cooperation with the world, mutually dependent with the world.”²⁰ In the final analysis process theology is idolatry making God like man; its basic thesis is “if man and creation constantly change, then God, being like man, must also remain in a state of flux.” Process theologians confuse the attributes of the Creator with those of His rebellious creation. Indeed, process theologians have proposed a new sovereign, namely process.

The View of Open Theism

The second divergent view, Open Theism, holds that, “God is unchanging in nature and essence but not in experience, knowledge and action. . . God responds to the changing needs of his children and changes direction when necessary.”²¹ This sounds suspiciously like the dipolar theism of Process Theology where God is divided between “his unchanging abstract essence and his concrete actuality.”²² Bruce A. Ware notes, “According to open theism, God is ontologically independent of the world (as with classical theism) while he enters freely into real and interactive relationship with his creatures (as stressed in process theism, but held in both).”²³ Therefore, Open Theism may be viewed at a mediating view between the historically orthodox view and that of Process Theology, although at times the lines between the two are blurred. If process theologians use God and the ever-changing natural universe synonymously, then how do open theists describe change in God? Clark Pinnock explains,

It is not a question of God’s changing in the sense of becoming better or worse, but of his pursuing covenant relationship and partnership with his people out of love for them flexibly

²⁰Ibid., 581.

²¹Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 118.

²²Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 305.

²³Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 144-45.

and creatively. Immutable in his self-existence, the God of the Bible is relational and changeable in his interaction with his creatures.²⁴

Numerous quotations above have clearly demonstrated the inherent connection between immutability and aseity, foreknowledge, independence, perfection, and infinitude, among numerous other attributes. If the connection is such, then how can open theists claim such “flexibility” for God? They are able, or rather are required, to claim such flexibility by amputating God’s foreknowledge; “God’s knowledge is conditioned by creaturely decisions, and he must respond to new, perhaps even unanticipated, situations moment by moment.”²⁵ To support their limited view of divine foreknowledge, open theists would reference such passages as Genesis 3:9-13 where God asks three questions which present His knowledge as limited. First, God calls to the man asking, “Where are you?” Second, He asks the man, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” Third, He asks the woman, “What is this that you have done?” The narrative in Exodus 32 would also point to God’s limited foreknowledge as He states His intention to destroy Israel (vv.9-10) and only moments later, after Moses pleads with God, it is recorded that “the LORD relented from the disaster that he had spoken of bringing on his people” (v.14). Open theists would claim that this change was brought about by Moses’ response to His threat, which He could not have foreknown. In his book, *When God Answers Prayer*, Bob Russell, commenting on this text, argues that, “It was gutsy. Who was Moses to think he could alter the mind of God? But the Bible reports an amazing thing: *Because of the prayer of Moses, God changed his mind.*”²⁶ Russell attempts to distinguish himself from open theists noting their claim that “[God] doesn’t

²⁴Clark H. Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 24.

²⁵Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 44-45.

²⁶Bob Russell and Rusty Russell, *When God Answers Prayer* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Co., Inc., 2003), 4.

know the future *for sure*,”²⁷ contrasting this with his view he states, “[God] knows *all possible futures*.”²⁸ Whether or not Russell is an open theist is not the aim of this paper; however, the logic he employs is exemplary of the open theist’s position.

A Nuanced Understanding of Divine Immutability

While it is clear that Process Theology and Open Theism are dissenting and unorthodox views, they have raised numerous objections to the classical view of divine immutability. Erickson even notes that, “there is an element of validity in process theology’s criticism of some classical orthodoxy. To be sure, God has sometimes been pictured as static, isolated from involvement with the world.”²⁹ What then is the proper response to these valid criticisms? “What we need is a more nuanced notion of immutability, one that takes into account the criticisms of process and open view thinkers but still upholds the essential points taught in Scripture and demonstrated by the conservative tradition.”³⁰ The dilemma for the exegete is that Scripture being inerrant cannot contradict itself, even in the case of two apparently contradictory passages. What then is to guide the exegete in discerning the meaning of and harmonizing these various and numerous passages of Scripture, which appear to stand in contradiction? In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine provides a principle which should guide the exegete in all his endeavors. This has become known as the analogy of Scripture, which simply states that any interpretation of Scripture must not stand contrary to any other aspect of Scripture. Augustine says it this way, “When . . . two or more interpretations are put upon the same words of Scripture . . . there is no danger if it can be shown from other passages of Scripture that any of

²⁷Ibid., 6.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 306.

the interpretations put on the words is in harmony with the truth.”³¹ From this, we must begin by presupposing the inerrancy and unity of Scripture, which means that passages emphasizing God’s change and those emphasizing His changelessness can be harmonized.

In his book, *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer gives us six aspects of God that do not change: His life, character, truth, ways, purpose, and His Son.³² First God’s life, or more specifically His existence and experience of His existence never change. As Packer clearly states, “He exists forever, and he is always the same. He does not grow older. His life does not wax or wane. He does not gain new powers nor lose those that he once had.”³³ God’s declaration “I AM WHO I AM” (Exod 3:14) has profound implications upon one’s understanding of God’s existence. The God of Scripture simply is. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev 22:13). When contrasting the Creator with His creation the Psalmist exclaims, “but you are the same, and your years have no end” (Ps 102:27). This section could have easily been included in the next section, which discusses God’s character; however, God’s existence outside of and over time has such a profound effect on all of His other attributes that it deserved a separate treatment.

Second, His character, “his essential attributes,”³⁴ never change. The fourth question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* asks, “What is GOD?” to which it answers, “God is a Spirit, infinite and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and

³⁰John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 265.

³¹Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 3.27.38, trans. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe under the title *On Christian Doctrine*, in *St. Augustin: The City of God, Christian Doctrine*, A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series [NPNF¹] (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1887; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 2:567.

³²J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 77-80.

³³*Ibid.*, 77.

truth.”³⁵ The immutability of God’s attributes naturally flows from His being “I AM;” God’s attributes cannot change because God is not in a state of becoming. He always has been and always will be.

Third, His truth, or more specifically His Word, never changes. “Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens” (Ps 119:89). “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (Ps 119:160). “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33). Scripture is explicitly clear that God’s Word is immutable.

Fourth, His purpose never changes. “The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations” (Ps 33:11). “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2). “The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble” (Prov 16:4; cf. Rom 9). Noting God’s immutable purpose over His creatures Chafer notes, “He creates them that they may serve His immutable will. Since God is the Creator of all things, it is absurd to suppose that He who creates cannot determine the choice and destiny of that which He has wrought.”³⁶ “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand” (Prov 19:21). In one of the most unequivocally terms Isaiah writes of God’s immutable purpose:

Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,’ calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it (Isaiah 46:9-11).

³⁴John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 568.

³⁵Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with A History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), 3:676-77.

³⁶Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-48; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1993), 3:174.

Fifth, His Son never changes. The immutability of God the Son is implied in the above discussion; however, the nature of the incarnation requires that it be addressed separately. A necessity which is clearly seen in light of Pinnock's exclamation, "The Word 'became' flesh—praise God for his changing unchangeability!"³⁷ Even so Henry confidently states, "Because Christ is ontologically changeless his salvation is permanently reliable; a changing Christ is not sure ground of hope."³⁸ Furthermore, the author of Hebrews writes, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb 13:8). How then God the Son enters human history as a Jewish male and not undergo change? Once again, one must return to God's existence outside of time. As Henry explains,

The permanent inclusion even of this glorified human nature in the experience of the Godhead did not involve a new mode of deity, however, even though it brings into profound and intimate interrelationships the timeless experience of God and the context of time-structured experience in which the exalted Christ rules as head of the Church.³⁹

The incarnation does not represent a new God but rather a different means by which God has purposed to reveal who He objectively is.

Sixth, His emotions never change. This has been negatively stated throughout history in terms of impassibility. The thoughts of Benedict Spinoza⁴⁰ do well to emphasize this incorrect view, "God is without passions, nor is he affected with any experience of joy (*laetitia*) or sadness (*tristitia*). . . . [God] loves no one nor hates any one. For God is affected with no emotion of joy or sadness."⁴¹ Contrasting this view Grudem defines immutability as follows, "God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions,

³⁷Pinnock, *The Grace of God and the Will of Man*, 24.

³⁸Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, 5:294.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 293.

⁴⁰While Spinoza is generally considered a pantheist; however, his statement defines the topic at hand with unparalleled precision and clarity.

and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations.”⁴² How can Grudem maintain this apparently contradictory position? First, from the perspective of God’s eternality: “acts of God in time, imply no change in Him; for the purpose to do these acts at that given time was always in Him, just as when He effected them.”⁴³ Second, from the perspective of God’s character: “In this relationship [with His creation] God has perfect freedom, but nothing he does should be interpreted as inconsistent with his nature.”⁴⁴

Earlier it was noted that the chief driving force behind Process Theology and Open Theism was the establishment of a genuine relationship between God and man, a relationship which cannot exist between an immutable deity and mutable man. There are two critical flaws to their logic, which will further define the nature of God’s emotional changelessness. First, their definition of genuine relationships is inherently flawed in that it is based upon observations of a rebellious creation. Man’s mutability, his ability to change, is the very thing that creates superficial and damaging relationships all the while robbing him of genuine ones. It is the fickle love of man that results in divorce, which is the precise contrast found in Scripture, “And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret” (1 Sam 15:29). Second, their definition is flawed in that they have failed to delineate between human subjectivity and divine objectivity. According to open and process theists, God’s experience of emotions necessitates change in God. Yet, God does not experience emotions subjectively as humans do, nor is He mastered by His emotions as men are. The God who is experiences emotion objectively, which is what is meant by “Anyone who does not love does not

⁴¹Benedict Spinoza, in Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 213-14.

⁴²Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 163.

⁴³Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, 45.

⁴⁴Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, 101.

know God, because God is love” (1 John 4:8). God is love, He defines it, and furthermore He is the objective definition of all emotion. Love, hate, anger, passion, grief, sorrow all find their objective definition in Him. Statements concerning God’s emotions in Scripture are not anthropocentric; rather statements of man’s emotions are theopocentric. The difference between man’s emotions and God’s is that man’s emotions have been profoundly affected by the fall and need to be redeemed, which is why there is a plethora of exhortations addressing Godly emotions in Scripture.

Concluding Thoughts

God does not and cannot change. He will sovereignly, in a way that is consistent with His character, fulfill His Word and fulfill His purposes as He has predetermined. It is “God who makes his own claim to deity on the basis that he knows, and tells, exactly what the future will be.”⁴⁵ Furthermore, man can have genuine relationship with God through the immutable priesthood of Christ (Heb 7:24) and because God is the objective definition of all emotion, man now has an objective reference point by which to measure his relationships with fallen humanity. In the end, “Our confidence rests in God whose decrees are unchanging and whose promises are unfailing. Yahweh is an ‘everlasting rock.’”⁴⁶

⁴⁵Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is Too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 35.

⁴⁶Henry, *God Revelation and Authority*, 5:289.

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